

Music and Musical Instruments



Some New Light on Stringed Instruments of the Ancient Tamil Country
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In the ancient Tamil country, all the musical instruments using vibrating strings were denoted by the word *yAL** and at the beginning of the Christian era, there were different kinds of *yALs* as mentioned in the *sangam* literature. The word *veenai* which is of Sanskrit origin, was introduced at a later period beginning with that of *SilapathikAram*. Several centuries later, during the period of *CinthAmani* both the words *yAL* and *veenai* were used to denote one and the same instrument. For instance, *makara yAL* was also called *makara veenai*. At a much later [date](#), when it became fashionable to use words of Sanskrit origin, the word *yAL* was completely dropped and only the word *veenai* was used. It is interesting that in Sanskrit the word *veenai* is used to describe harp-like instruments as well. For example, the hundred-stringed harp is called the *sata-tantri-veena*.

There are two main types of stringed instruments. The first type includes those musical instruments with large number of strings, with each string producing only one musical note. These we shall call the *harp-type* instruments. A *harp-type* instrument of fourteen strings, for example, can produce only fourteen notes and no more. The second type includes instruments which normally have a small number of strings. But from each string several musical notes can be produced by artificially adjusting the length of each vibrating string. This we shall call the *lute-type*. From such an instrument, even if it had only one string, several musical notes can be produced.

During the first ten centuries of the Christian era, both these types are found represented in sculptures. In the last few centuries, the *harp-type* instrument seems to have completely disappeared from the Tamil country and only the *lute-type* instruments are found in sculptures. As both the *harp-type* instruments and the pure Tamil word *yAL* have gone out of use, it was but natural to identify the *harp-like* instruments with the word *yAL*. Swami Vipulananda expounds such a thesis in his book, '*yAL nUl*'. Other eminent authorities disagree with this naive solution to the

problem. In his '*pANar kaivaLi* ', Dr Varaguna Pandian presents the theory that the word *yAL* denoted instruments of the *lute-type* and also that all the stringed instruments of the Tamil country were of the same *lute-type* but of different sizes varying only in the number of strings. Such a view was based on an important [claim](#) of Dr Abraham Pandither that the present-day *Tanjore veenai* is essentially the *sengOtu yAL*.¹ Pandither however had stated in his '*KarunAmirtha SAgaram* ' that other ancient instruments which had a large number of strings were in fact *harp-like*. Thus there is considerable difference of opinion among the experts about the name and the structure of the different kinds of stringed instruments.

Both the *harp-like* and the *lute-like* instruments have several parts in common as they are basically stringed instruments. Both types must have vibrating strings (*Narambu*), hollow sound-boxes (*paththar*) to increase the volume and the quality of the sound produced by the string and a stem (*kOdu*) to which one end of each string is attached. The sound-box may be made of wood or gourd (*surai*) and may or may not be covered with [skin](#) (*pOrvaith thOl*). In both the types tuning pegs (*murukkAni*) may be used to adjust the tension of each string. In the *lute-type* instruments, the strings will be very close to and parallel to the stem so that it will be possible to produce different notes from each string. The whole stem can be absolutely straight, slightly bent or curved at one end as in the *Tanjore veenai*. Even in *harp-like* instruments the stems can be curved or straight as can be seen from the figures. In the past, sculptural evidence was not much sought after and experts relied mainly on the poetic descriptions of the instruments. For instance, if an instrument is mentioned as having a curved stem, Vipulanandar concluded that the instrument was *harp-like* and from the same description Varaguna Pandian concluded that the instrument was *lute-like* ! On the basis of the sculptural evidence now available, our notions about some of the important instruments need to be changed.

PerumbANatrappaDai of the *sangam* period mentions an instrument called *vil yAL*,² literally meaning bow *yAL*. It was bent in the form of a bow. A single piece of wood was chosen such that it had a natural hollow. This single piece formed both the sound box and the stem. The string was made of twisted fibre. In the instruments of the later period, the string was some form of gut or wire. It is interesting to note that the stem of *vil yAL* was made from *gmelina* (*kumizhi*) shrub and the string from the 'snake plant' *sansiviera* (*maral*), both of which are commonly found on our campus. As it is stated that this instrument was used by a cowherd, it is very likely that it was developed locally.

In *SilappathikAram* we find that the minstrels (*pANar*) living near Madurai used the *sengOtu yAL*. It had seven strings and its sound-box was made of wood. The present *Tanjore veenai* also has seven strings, a wooden sound-box and it is not found in the North. It is quite possible that the *Tanjore veenai* evolved out of the

ancientsengOtu yAL. If this yAL were of the *harp-type*, only seven notes could have been produced by the instrument. In singing, certainly more than seven notes are used, and this instrument would not have been able to produce all the notes required by the singer if it were *harp-type*. An octave contains eight notes (*sa,ri,ka,ma,pa,tha,ni*) and in singing the normal range is two octaves. KOvalan is described in *Purancheri yiRutha kAthai* as singing in three octaves, accompanying himself in the *sengOtu yAL*.³ This will be impossible with a *harp-type* instrument. Therefore *sengOtu yAL* must have been of the *lute-like*. However, one should be very careful before drawing such conclusions without confirmatory sculptural evidence.

MAthavi in *SilapathikAram* is described as using the *sakOta yAL*, an instrument with fourteen strings. A *harp-like* instrument with a large number of strings is depicted in the Amaravathi sculptures of the third century A.D. Vipulanandar asserts that the Amaravathi instrument is in fact *sakOta yAL*, since the number of strings shown on the sculpture is more than seven. If this is true, then *sakOta yAL* must have been introduced into Tamilnad from the North. For the Amaravathi-type instrument is also found in a coin of Samudra Gupta, sculptures of the Gupta period and even in those of the Mauriya period. However we are fortunate in having the depiction of a different harp-like instrument at the Darasuram temple built by Rajendra Cholan in the 11th century. This instrument is depicted as held by Tiruneelakanda Perumpanar and his name is clearly inscribed beneath the panel. Tiruneelakanda Yalpanar is believed to be a historic figure, being an expert on *sakOta yAL*. Hence there is no doubt that the Darasuram instrument is the *sakOta yAL*. The stem of the *sakOta yAL* is shown to be straight and long and is different from the curved stem of the Amaravathi instrument. One can see clearly the strings and the leather bands (*thivvu*) used to tie up the strings to the stem. The sound-box is fixed at an unusual angle and the instrument rests on the ground with the stem held vertical. It follows that the diagram of *sakOta yAL* given by Vipulanandar has to be discarded together with Varaguna Pandian's theory that the *sakOta yAL* was *lute-like*. In the Tamil Encyclopedia, the diagram of *sakOta yAL* is reproduced from Vipulanandar's book and one hopes that in future editions, the diagram of the Darasuram instrument will be given to describe *sakOta yAL*.

Another interesting instrument called the *makara yAL* features prominently in *CinthAmani* and *Perungathai*. Vipulanandar claims that it must have had an European origin as it is mentioned in *Perungathai* that a *makara yAL*⁴ was the handiwork of the *yavanar* or the Europeans. On the other hand, the Romans, whose coins are found all over Tamilnad, had no harp. In fact they said that harp was only for the barbarians and not for civilized people like themselves ! We are once more lucky in having a well-preserved *harp-like* instrument depicted at Thirumayam side by side with a *lute-like* instrument. The rock-cut panel at Thirumayam belongs to the

eighth century and is kept in excellent condition. The *harp-like* instrument is in the form of a fish, with the forked tail very clearly marked. The word *makaram* denotes a shark or a fish and there is no difficulty in identifying the instrument as the *makara yAL*. The sound-box is covered with skin and the instrument appears to be studded with precious stones. The strings are not depicted but the leather bands are. This discovery of *makara yAL* at Thirumayam makes it necessary that the existing ideas about the shape of *makara yAL* must be changed. The shapes of the instrument as visualized by Vipulanandar and Varaguna Pandian have to be discarded as neither of these resembles the Thirumayam instrument.

For the first time in Indian history, a certain *lute-like* instrument was depicted at Mahabalipuram in the middle of the seventh century. It is a simple instrument with a straight stem with a gourd attached at one end as sound-box. It is found at about half a dozen places at Mahabalipuram and again at Kanchipuram. One must remember that the sculptural history of Tamilnad begins at Mahabalipuram whereas in North India they had sculptures in stone from the Mauriya period itself. This *lute-like* instrument is not found in North India before the seventh century and it was probably unknown in that region. If this instrument were of the northern origin, it would have very likely found a place in the northern sculptures along with the other instruments of the Gupta period. But it is not to be seen. Therefore, it is highly probable that this instrument was indigenous to Tamilnad. The same type of instrument is also found at the Big Temple, Tanjore. This must be the *veenai*, as referred to in the inscriptions of Rajaraja Cholan found in the same temple. Such an instrument is referred to again in *TiruvilayAdal PurAnam* as *yAL* -- its sound-box was a gourd⁵ (*NedunkodikkurungAyp paththar*) In all likelihood this instrument was the *surai yAL*⁶ or gourd *yAL* which is mentioned in the collection of proverbs (*pazhamozhi*). Anyhow we have established that even though this instrument is denoted by the word *veenai* of Sanskrit origin, in all probability it originated in Tamilnad itself.

In this sort of study, the conclusions arrived at are necessarily tentative and may have to be revised in the light of further research. Several basic questions remain to be answered in the study of the different types of musical instruments of Tamilnad. For instance the *sangam* literature mentions instruments such as *pAlai yAL* and *peri yAL* and we have not found the exact shapes of these instruments. On the other hand there are instruments represented in the Pallava sculptures whose names we do not yet know. For instance, at Mahabalipuram there is a primitive drone (*Suruthi*) instrument depicted with a gourd fitted longitudinally and a three-pronged stick as stem. To play such an instrument one hand is sufficient as the single drone note is played throughout as accompaniment to the singing. Here the player uses the left hand and the sculpture is found facing the sea in the upper storey of the Dharma Raja *ratham*. This is perhaps

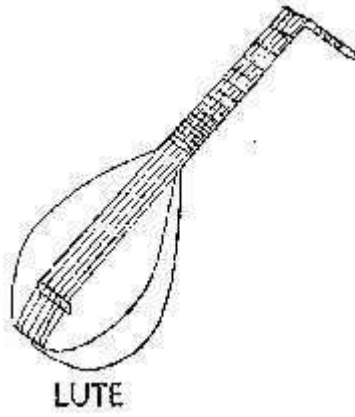
the first find of a drone instrument but we do not even know its name. Another interesting find is at Kailasanathar Temple at Kanchipuram in Cave 40. A *lute-type* instrument with a pear-shaped sound-box is seen in the hands of a female figure. The female figure probably represents Parvathi in the form of MATHangi, the *yAL* goddess and this is the earliest representation of a proto-type of *Tanjore veenai*. Both the hands are used while playing--the right hand to set the strings in vibration and the left to adjust the length of the strings to produce the desired pitch. This limestone work is now covered with plaster and nothing more can be said about this unless the plaster is removed !

We have stated that both the words *yAL* and *veenai* are only general terms for stringed instruments. For the first time we have identified *sakOta yAL* and *makara yAL* from sculptural evidences available in Tamilnad. We have also argued that the '*veena*' found for the first time in India at Mahabalipuram is the ancient Tamil instrument *surai yAL* and we have briefly described two new instruments from the Pallava sculptures. Certain scholars have tried to show that anything good in Tamil music must have come from outside or at least the names must have a Sanskrit origin ! All we have done is to provide certain evidences to the contrary.



EARLY DRONE INSTRUMENT
MAHABALIPURAM

EARLY LUTE-LIKE INSTRUMENT
KANCHIPURAM



* The hard consonants and the long vowels are denoted by their corresponding capital letters in transliteration (except at the beginning of proper names).

¹சேர சோழ பாண்டிய நாடுகளிலும் மைசூர் ராஜ்யத்திலும் ஆயிரமாயிரமாக வழங்குவரும் செங்கோட்டியாழ் என்ற ஓற்றத் வாத்தியம் தற்காலத்தில் வீணை என்ற பெயரால் அழைக்கப்படுகிறது—சுருணமிர்த சாகரம், 881.

² புழங்கோட்டுத் தொடுத்த குமிழின் மரற்புரி நரம்பின்
யிவ்வாழ்நகசுக்கும் விசலெறி குறிஞ்சி—180-182.

³ செவ்விறம் புரிந்த செங்கோட்டு யாழில்
வரன்முறை வந்த மூவகைத் தானத்தா
பூல்கலைப் பாவை பாடல் பாணி—106, 110-111.

⁴ யவனக் கைவினை மாணப் புணர்ந்ததோர் மகரவினை
—— யாழ் நலந் தெரிந்தது, 23.

⁵ குண்டுரீர் வறந்திட டன்ன நெடுங்கொடிக் குறுங்காய்ப் பத்தர்
தண்டுரீ விறத்த நல்லாழிடந்தழீஇத் தெறித்துத் தாக்கிக்
கண்டுமா டகந்தி ரித்துக் கௌவிய திவ்விற்பாவ
விண்டுதே நொழுதிற் றென்ன வீக்கிமென் சுருதி கூட்டி—விறகுவிற்ற படலம், 27.

⁶ கற்றூர் பலரைத்தன் கண்ணாக இல்லாதான்
உற்றிடர்ப் பட்ட பொழுதின்கண் தேற்றம்
மரையா துணைபயிரும் மாமலை நாட!
கரையாழ் நரம்பறுத் தற்று—பழமொழி நானூறு, 196.